



Good morning and thank you for having me along today to talk about our local food network.

My name is Sonia and I am president of Food Fossickers; a voluntary committee run food trade network within the Central Victorian region.

I am a chef by trade and with my husband Nick, own Masons of Bendigo – a one hat restaurant focusing on championing our regions' quality producers.

A driver in opening Masons and focusing on our region's abundance was the feeling of disconnect from the people who produced and grew the food we were working with whilst in Singapore. Don't get me wrong – Nick and I were both living the chef's dream with the world's finest luxury food items imported from all over the world at our fingertips (and quite often mouths!)

Yet there was no connection with who grew the food, how it was grown or the region from which it had been produced.

In late 2012, the year we opened Masons, I took up an opportunity to join the Food Fossickers' committee as President and continue to hold the position to this day. It has been, and will continue to be, a pleasure promoting and championing Central Victoria's abundance of quality produce.

Before I talk more on Food Fossickers, I wanted to share with you the economic impact our restaurant has had over the past financial year. Through direct relationships with our

producers, we have spent close to \$250,000 for local produce we showcase on our menu. Most of these are primary products with some value add such as the pickled green tomatoes I have displayed on the Food Fossickers stand. Not bad for a 60 seater restaurant, open 5 out of 7 days and closed for three weeks over Christmas. We are also very mindful of paying our producers and all suppliers on time and for a fair price. Now take those figures and multiply them by the amount of hospitality venues we have in town and you are looking at some serious dollars spent within the region which would then have an enormous flow on effect for other local businesses as people shop and support local

VISION - A world class thriving and connected food region, championing a sustainable local food network that provides local food to local people.

MISSION is to provide leadership, support, promotion and advocacy to our members as well as connecting producers to venues and all members to our local community.

Launched in 2002 by a band of passionate locals, the Food Fossickers's **vision** is for a world class thriving and connected food region, championing a sustainable local food network that provides local food to local people.

And OUR MISSION is to provide leadership, support, promotion and advocacy to our members as well as connecting producers to venues and all members to our local community.

Our not for profit trade network aims to bring our producers to the forefront and champion their world class products.

The Food Fossickers committee work tirelessly to achieve success with this. Five main ways we work to achieve our vision:

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1. Linking our regional restaurants and cafés directly to our producers
2. A strong partnership with Bendigo & Regional Tourism
3. Nurturing our affiliations with other networks
4. Hosting of events of all sizes
5. Industry development and education

1. *Linking our regional restaurants and cafés directly to our producers.*

Part of the Food Fossickers membership criteria requires a venue to support at least ten locally grown/produced food items on their menu. We provide a three month transition period for those businesses who don't quite meet the criteria. And we work with these businesses during this time to connect them with relevant producers

2. *A strong partnership with Bendigo & Regional Tourism.*

Having a strong marketing platform for our network, through our partnership with Bendigo Tourism and the City, we are seeing first-hand the economic benefits within our region. Members are exposed directly to new consumer markets and with broader social media exposure, we are able to leverage our member's products to a wider audience base.

Our members are also seeing the value of the tourism partnership and are open to new marketing strategies which may not have presented themselves without this collaboration.



Just to give you an example, I run a bespoke tour once a month which takes a group of 8 to the Bendigo farmers market, two producers farm gates and 4 of Heathcote's wine-makers (at one winery). The day finishes with a Masons style dinner at my home. The guests are encouraged to spend whilst at each destination (except when at my house!) and on average a group of 8 will inject around \$4,000 into our local economy which I believe is a fabulous outcome.



3. Nurturing our affiliations with other networks and like minded people such as:

- o 'Sustain: The Australian Food Network',
- o Bendigo Community Farmers Market and other regional accredited markets
- o Bendigo and Heathcote Winegrowers Associations
- o The Bendigo Sustainability Group.
- o Growing Change
- o Regrarians

Collaboration and cross promotion within these networks, where possible, have been paramount in the success to further reach and promote our producers.



4. Hosting of events of all sizes such as:

- o 'Paddock to Park Carnivore'L' which is held annually as part of the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival where our local producers products are showcased to our wider community through our restaurant's offerings. This has been a sell out event each year and is proof our community are keen to engage and support.

The event attracts a wide demographic, as we can see in the above slide who have all come together through food.

I chose the below slide also as it shows how our hospitality community comes together side by side and connects at this event. Fabulous!



- o Food Fossickers Foodie Tour – which is a weekly run tour that begins at the Bendigo Visitor’s Information centre. During this tour, a volunteer guide leads participants through the city stopping at five Food Fossicker venues. During these visits, each venue provides tastings of local produce, something to take home and a little about their personal story, background on their business and why they value living in Bendigo.

These events provide a platform to connect our producers and their products to our community via our hospitality members.

5. Industry development and education – such as:

Hospitality member only, farm gate tours which have seen us visit and support our producer members in the outer regions of Mitchell, Loddon and Mount Alexander Shires.

The image below is of Mclvor Farm Foods in Tooborac where Belinda and Jason opened their farm gate to two Bendigo restaurants for lunch and a farm tour. Chefs and front of house participated.



These tours are a wonderful way to connect our next generation of hospitality peers – chefs, front of house and food retail partners directly with our producers, allowing them to learn first-hand how and where their food is produced, which is a concept that is quite new to many. Education is a key element for a long term sustainable local food system which is something Nick spoke about yesterday.

Since 2012, the demand for local and regional produce in Bendigo has increased significantly, and can be anticipated to continue to grow strongly for years to come.

To guarantee growth we need to ensure:

- **better returns for producers** – a fair price to enable business growth and profits
- **honest branding and marketing**, particularly by hospitality venues– don't promote a product on your menu that you haven't ordered from a producer in months
- **education** – more needs to be done to educate the community on the benefits of supporting local food producers - both financial and health benefits

- **educating our hospitality industry and the next generation of chefs** how to cook within the seasons
- **efficiency savings** (streamlined ordering systems for example) and distribution solutions which will save time and money
- **increased access** to local produce
- **increased regional brand identity** of one of quality
- **community's ability** to utilise produce when in abundance to create value-add products – knowing how to preserve, process and on-sell

These points will require both short and long term strategies (Take yourself back to the analogy of the baby floating down the river) and continued partnerships with local government, education providers and networks such as Food Fossickers who are able to connect and engage the community to our producers. I believe a Food Hub in Bendigo will enable and overcome many of these challenges and goals and confidently can raise my hand to say 'yes, I'm in, how can I contribute to enable its long term success'. Thank you.